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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of the life and ideas of John Comenius (1592-1670) and compares practices advanced by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) with principles advocated by Comenius. Comenius' educational plans called for education to begin at birth and continue to adulthood. Education was divided into four levels: (1) birth to 6 years of age; (2) grammar school, from 6 to 12 years of age; (3) secondary school, from 12 to 18 years of age; and (4) university, from 18 to 24 years of age. Comenius proposed that the same subjects be taught in the different levels, but with varying degrees of difficulty adapted to learner development. He advocated universal education and saw education as a vehicle for social change and unity. He also provided mothers with guidance for teaching their children and applied the principle of using objects or pictures to teach. That the policies advocated by the NAEYC correspond closely with Comenius' principles is seen in NAEYC's early childhood education objectives and the organization's concepts of developmental appropriateness according to age and individual differences; sense training and learning by doing; learning through play; and a child-centered curriculum.
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J. A. COMENIUS: REFLECTIONS IN THE NEW WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

In tracing contemporary educational movements and ideas back to their origins, one finds that a surprisingly large number of them were derived from the progressive tendencies of the past. One such source is Comenius, who formulated many of today's practices in education. There are few content areas or aspects of educational methodology in the current curriculum which have not been influenced or advocated by Comenius.

Comenius introduced and advocated many concepts of education which we take for granted today. For example, he established the life long process of education, starting with the prenatal care of the expectant mother and continuing through university education; advocated early childhood education, female education and above all universal education. He introduced the incorporation of history and geography into the curriculum, the value of drawing, and physical and ethical elements in education. Above all Comenius called everyone's attention to the importance of sense training in teaching, and enjoyment in learning.

Comenius' School of Infancy anticipated Pestalozzi's manual for mothers and foreshadowed the kindergarten of Froebel. While many of his principles are far from being adopted globally, many form the basis of American educational thought.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is two fold:

1. To give a brief overview of Comenius the man and his ideas;
2. To compare selected practices advanced by NAEYC with principles advocated by Comenius 400 years ago.

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THE MAN AND HIS IDEAS

There is nothing startling about the educational reforms of Comenius today; we talk about them every time we gather for a conference. However, to conceive them and to enunciate them before the various sciences were in place, and to devote a life time to teaching them and refining them, required a broad mind and a deep commitment to education.

Comenius (1592-1670) was a bishop of the Moravian Church, Unitas Fratrum, a Protestant church in Czechoslovakia and an educator. Because of the persecution of Protestants during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) Comenius was forced to flee his country and spent the rest of his life in exile.

It is necessary to give a glimpse of Comenius' background to explain the development of his ideas about education.

His strength lay in the dedication of his life, first to God and next to man. This commitment helped sustain him through persecution, exile and despair. The impact of war on Comenius' life was deep and war was the constant background for his life. He was very much aware that violence breeds violence. This strong sense of vocation is the key to Comenius' life because it lifted him above his horrible circumstances, and allowed him singlehandedly to pursue his dream to reform his nation and the whole world.

Comenius believed that education molds the man so that if we could train youth properly, it would transform the world. He was trying to reeducate the heart of man. He believed in the regenerating power of education and sought it for all people. He saw education as the shaping and the growth of the whole man for the benefit of the whole world.

In addition to ministering to the many needs of his congregation in exile, Comenius began writing on educational matters for he believed that if Bohemia and Moravia were to become independent again, it must be with people renewed in intelligence and virtue. To prepare his nation for this eventuality, Comenius developed an educational system that started at birth and continued to adulthood. He maintained that

a certain fixed time should be set apart for the complete education of the youth, until twenty four years of age. He proceeded to divide this time into four different levels, of six years each, which correspond with the various stages of cognitive development.

The different levels are as follows:

1. The Infant or Mother School-birth to six years of age (infancy) - in every home.
2. The vernacular or Grammar School - six to 12 years of age (childhood) - in every village.
3. The Latin School or secondary - 12 to 18 years of age (adolescence) - in every province.
4. The University and travel - 18 to 24 years of age (youth) in every kingdom.

In these various levels, the same subjects were to be taught. However, the degree of difficulty of each subject was to be adapted to the learner's stage of development and progress. In the earlier levels the subjects were to be taught broadly and generally; in the later levels, in more detail and depth.

As the reality for an independent Bohemia became less and less attainable, Comenius turned his vision and efforts to the wider aim of education. He saw education for all nations and for all people, a universal education or pampaedia as he called it. He was striving for an all inclusive universal system of education, where all classes, all young people of both sexes could go to school as well as those who are backward, mentally weak and of limited intelligence. The handicapped child needs more external help since nature can help him less due to his internal defect. (Great Didactic, pp. 218-221). In America today we have both Federal and State legislation which provides for the education of children with special needs from birth through the age of 21 years of age.

Comenius believed, that if knowledge could be universalized, so it can be taught to everyone, it will eliminate the tensions among peoples. He saw education as a vehicle to social change: to promote unity among the waring factions of Christianity during his time, and to promote equality among classes. In the

Dedicatory Letter of the Great Didactic, he stated "that there is no more certain way under the sun for the raising of a sunken humanity than the proper education of the young." (Great Didactic, p. 166)

Echoes of his idea were heard when Nelson Mandela, visiting Boston in June 1990, urged the teenagers to stay in school "because education is the most powerful weapon we will need." (NEW YORK TIMES, June 24, 1990)

During his lifetime Comenius attracted the world's attention through his writings, about 130 items. He wrote in Czech to inform his nation, and in Latin-the international language - to inform and educate all other peoples. The writings include his philosophy of education, his methodology, and textbooks to implement both. Kings and parliaments solicited his advice and his aid to reform their school systems. He advised the English Parliament, reformed the schools of Sweden, and visited Holland, Transylvania, and Poland. According to persistent tradition, he was offered the presidency of Harvard College. (Matthews, 1919)

Comenius' ideas and principles about education, and his teaching methods came to the American shores via the English translations of The Great Didactic, Keatinge, 1896; Orbis Sensualis Pictus, Hoole, 1728; The School of Infancy, Benham, 1858; the use of Janua as a text book at Harvard College during the Colonial years, (Hanus, p. 209); and more recent works of Monroe (1900) and Spinka (1943). In 1892, on the occasion of the Tercentenary of Comenius' birth, The National Education Association and the Educational Review each commemorated the event with articles about his work and his contribution to education.

COMENIUS' BOOKS

A brief look at three of Comenius' books is necessary at this point in order to gain some understanding of his concepts and to see the similarities with contemporary thought regarding early childhood education.

The Great Didactic (1628?) is a complete treatise on how to teach all subjects to all men, and how to teach them in such a way that the result will be certain. All of Comenius' seminal ideas and principles about his philosophy of education and his methodology are stated in great detail in this book.

In Chapter XVII, The Principles of Facility in Teaching and in Learning, he outlined his total concept of education. This is how he stated it:

> Following in the footsteps of nature we find that the process of education will be easy
> (i) If it begins early, before the mind is corrupted.
> (ii) If the mind be duly prepared to receive it.
> (iii) If it proceed from the general to the particular.
> (iv) And from what is easy to what is more difficult.
> (v) If the pupil be not overburdened by too many subjects.
> (vi) And if progress be slow in every case.
> (vii) If the intellect be forced to nothing to which its natural bent does not incline it, in accordance with its age and with the right method.
> (viii) If everything be taught through the medium of the senses.
> (xi) And if the use of everything taught be continually kept in view.
> (x) If everything be taught according to one and the same method.
>
> These, I say, are the principles to be adopted if education is to be easy and pleasant. (Great Didactic p. 279)

He strongly believed that the material of knowledge is derived through the senses, therefore sense training is fundamental to learning. For Comenius knowledge acquired through the senses becomes permanent and continues with the following example: "if I have once tasted sugar, seen a camel, heard a nightingale, or been to Rome, the incidents will remain." (Great Didactic, p. 337)

Another chapter of the Great Didactic, Sketch of the Mother-School, later became two separate books: The School of Infancy and The Orbis Pictus. (Great Didactic, p. 411-418) Both books are very important for early childhood education. They set a foundation for subsequent developments in early childhood by Pestalozzi and Foebel.

The School of Infancy (1628-1630) is a guide for mothers on teaching the young child. Comenius identified the mother as the first teacher of the child and her importance in the child's early stimulation. It can be used by teachers and all others involved in the care and education of the young child. The School of Infancy covers the first six years of the child's life, laying the foundation for all that he is to learn, and to be, in later life. The child is to be given simple lessons in objects, taught to know stones, plants, animals and the names and the uses of members of his body; educated to distinguish light and dark colors, the geography of the cradle, the room, the farm, the street, and the field; trained in moderation, purity and obedience; and taught to say the Lord's pray. Many of these ideas are reflected in today's early childhood curriculum. No other writer before Comenius comprehended the pedagogical significance of infancy as he did. Since the education of the child must start at its birth, mothers must assume the teacher's role.

The mothers of the 17th century, according to Comenius, were not prepared to undertake this role for they were lacking appropriate training. He wrote the School of Infancy in Czech, to help the mothers of his nation with their mission, as first teachers of the child.

The Orbis Sensualis Pictus (1657) (The World in Pictures) was written to aid the process of learning language by the use of pictures. In this book, Comenius applied fully this principle: words must be accompanied by the objects they are depicting and in the absence of the objects pictures representing objects. He invited the artist to illustrate the text. By appealing to the sense of the child learning became easy and pleasurable.

The distinctive feature of this book is that each subject in the text is illustrated by a small engraving. Everything named in the text has a corresponding number in the engraving. The reference numbers help the child to link the word with the pictured object. The text below the picture is in parallel columns, Latin in one and a translation in the other.

Every since then, children's books and textbooks have emulated Comenius' ideas. In America, annual awards are given to the best written and best illustrated books for children. (The Caldecott Medal is given for the best illustrated book in the year of its publication).

Comenius did not alter his ideas substantially over the years. He continued to expand and refine them in his effort to establish a universal school system. For him, the goal of education is not merely the training of the child at home or in school; it is a process affecting man's moral and useful life, the countless social adjustments he must make. For Comenius, society as a whole is considered a sub-species of education. Education therefore is not limited to the action of the school and the family, but it is part and parcel of general social life. Human society is an educative society with both positive and negative learning.

The 20th century attempt to teach men to live, learn, and act for the most good, to the most people, e.g., to save the environment, is the mirrored image of Comenius' principles of knowledge, virtue and piety, put to use on a practical scale and on a world wide field.

Comenius' ideas are salient. They are as applicable today as they were 400 years ago. His influence has been lasting. Over the centuries many of the reforms he advocated have been incorporated into practice today. We take them for granted and seldom do we give him credit for his contribution.

COMENIUS' REFLECTIONS IN THE NEW WORLD

Comenius' dreams are reflected in the American schools, for they are for all children of all peoples. Every child is eligible to attend and move up the educational ladder from kindergarten through the university largely at the expense of the State. Although the American educational system has been under fire in recent years for not doing its job well, its universality reflects Comenius' principles.

In analyzing the contemporary curriculum of American early childhood education and the philosophy behind it, both appear to be Comenian in scope. The early childhood curriculum has an order and sequence but not a rigid structure. Activities flow from one to another and the children are free to move about and choose their activities according to their interests. The classroom environment is prepared for children to explore and experiment with a variety of materials. It may be in the housekeeping area or "the dentist office" where they practice adult roles; the setting up for snack where they count napkins, cookies, and chairs. Children learn to grow plants and to care for pets or measure and pour water, all the foundation of science. There is language learning, and music and art activities for enjoyment. The children are free to move at their own pace. All these activities and learning form the foundation of all subsequent learning which will take place in the successive classes the child will attend in later years and they are very reminiscent of what Comenius prescribed for the young children of his time. (School of Infancy, pp. 16-22)

Before the comparison is made between the NAEYC Standards and Comenius' principles, it is important to point out the following: Early childhood education has been institutionalized in the U.S. for over 100 years. There have been private and public kindergartens since the 1880's, Nursery School since the 1920's and Head Start since 1965. Four year olds have been in public schools in many of the States off and on over the years. Three and four years olds are now in public schools in some of the states in the US.

There is no national curriculum, however, for preschool, elementary or secondary education in the U.S. It is left to each one of the fifty states to decide what their curriculum will be, by national constitutional provision.

Professional associations have been instrumental in strongly influencing educational decision making the U.S., especially in early childhood education. One such association is the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

NAEYC was founded in 1926. It has about 70,000 members and has a commitment to good programs for young children and professional development for teachers. In 1986, NAEYC published a book which described developmentally appropriate practices which are very much reminiscent of Comenius' ideas.

COMPARISON OF COMENIUS' PRINCIPLES WITH NAEYC PRACTICES

The decision to compare Comenius' educational principles with NAEYC's Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children From Birth Through Age 8, was made because (1) they represent a body of acceptable practices in early childhood education in the U.S.A. today; (2) they represent the experiences of thousands of early childhood professionals both academics and practitioners; (3) they evolved after several years of debate; (4) they have been published and adhered to for several years now; (5) through a voluntary accreditation program administered by NAEYC (The Academy of Early Childhood Programs), early childhood programs are encouraged to achieve and maintain these standards in their daily practices; and (6) there is a easily discernible connectedness between Comenius principles and NAEYC standards.

A comparison of his principles with these standards will demonstrate the saliency, continuity and applicability of Comenius' ideas and give him his overdue credit for being the originator of much of what we are practicing today. The NAEYC guidelines are listed first, followed by Comenius' statements, then discussion.

In the title of the NAEYC book one sees the striking similarity with Comenius' statement that education should start as early as possible, follow the course and order of nature and be adapted to the mental stages of the child. (Great Didactic, pp. 250 ff. & 411 ff; and School of Infancy, pp. 44-49)

Comenius saw the possibilities which our knowledge of nature could have in the education of the young and incorporated it in his educational scheme. Although he was lacking all the scientific knowledge we have today to support his views, he knew

through his own observations that young children should be given a different, special training than the older ones. Thus, he paved the way for Froebel's (1782-1852) ideas and practices, which came more than a century later.

The concept of developmental appropriateness today has two dimensions: Age appropriateness indicates that there are universal, predictable sequences of growth and change that occur in children during the first 8 years of life. These predictable changes occur in all domains of development-physicial, emotional social and cognitive. Individual appropriateness indicates that each child is a unique person with an individual pattern and timing of growth as well as an individual personality, learning style, with a different family and cultural background.

Learning in young children is the result of interaction between the child's thoughts and experiences with materials, ideas and people. It follows then that both the curriculum and the adults' interactions with children should be responsive to age appropriateness and to individual differences.

The next four statements from the NAEYC practices deal with the early childhood education curriculum which includes the content, materials and role of the teacher.

1. A developmentally appropriate curriculum provides for all areas of a child's development: physical, emotional, social and cognitive through an integrated approach.
2. Appropriate curriculum planning is based on the teacher's observations and recordings of each child's special interests and developmental progress.
3. Curriculum planning emphasizes learning as an interactive process. Teachers prepare the environment for children to learn through active exploration and interaction with adults, other children and materials. (NAEYC, p. 3)
4. Learning materials should be concrete, real, and relevant to the lives of young children. (NAEYC, p. 4)

Here we find several reflections of Comenius' ideas. He stated that all teaching should be based on the child's capacities as they develop in the course of time and progress in school (Great Didactic, p. 288) and that during the first six years of life children should be introduced to the elements of

all subjects of knowledge. Poetry, rhythm and rhyme be included for the pleasure of children. (School of Infancy). Children should be allowed to play with anything that delights them as long as it is not harmful. Today we refer to it as growth through play. For Comenius the object of education was knowledge of things, knowledge of oneself and knowledge of others. (School of Infancy pp. 16-22)

Comenius also pointed out that nature study must be made the basis of all early teaching, so that the child may exercise his senses and be trained to acquire knowledge first hand. (Great Didactic, p. 263)

Comenius maintained that the material of knowledge is derived though the senses and sense training is fundamental to all learning. (Great Didactic, p. 335) and anything we teach should be presented to as many senses as possible and things which pertain to more than one sense they should be presented to all those senses. (Great Didactic, p. 279)

The senses, being the main guides or receptors of learning during childhood, should be taken advantage of in teaching children.

Comenius established the primacy of learning by doing when he said:

> Craftsmen do not hold their apprentices down to theories, they put them to work without delay so that they may learn to forge metal by forging, to carve by carving, etc. Therefore schools should let the pupils learn to write by writing, to speak by speaking, to reason by reasoning, etc.
> so that schools become workshops in which work is done eagerly. (Great Didactic, p. 347)

Two more of Comenius' principle deserve special mention here because they articulate developmentally appropriate practice. Principle VII: "Nature imparts stimulus only to fully developed beings who wish to break out of their shell," and principle VIII: "Nature helps itself in every possible way." These two statements, point out to the need (1) for education by degrees in accordance with the different stages of mental development achieved by the child; and (2) for a system of teaching that does

accordance with the different stages of mental development achieved by the child; and (2) for a system of teaching that does not reverse the natural sequence of matter and form. He further states that it is cruel whenever the child is obliged to carry out tasks which are beyond his age and capacities; and whenever he is made to learn by heart things which have not been clearly explained and understood. (The Great Didactic, p. 407)

Today the early childhood curriculum is a curriculum of experiences. It is flexible and includes the beginnings of every subject that the child will encounter in his later schooling. Through this curriculum children learn by experiencing the world about them; by interacting with materials, and objects. They learn about themselves and others in their daily interactions with other children and adults. Most of the time children learn through play.

The developmentally appropriate curriculum places the individual child's abilities and skills as the starting point for learning rather than the subject matter to be learned, or some pattern of behavior to which the child should conform. Comenius was the first reformer to create a curriculum from the child's point of view, a child centered curriculum. The child's growth is dynamic. It is measured against his own skills and abilities. By beginning with the child' development as the focal point one thinks in terms of a growing individual and the interest is growth. Facts about the child then take a new significance and give the cue for his proper guidance.

Absent from the NAEYC book are two principles of great importance in the educational scheme of Comenius: 1. a statement about discipline and ways to discipline a child and 2. the moral development of children.

Discipline is addressed indirectly by the following two statements: a. Adults facilitate the development of self esteem by respecting, accepting and comforting children, regardless of the child's behavior; and b. Adults facilitate the development of self-control in children. (NAEYC, p. 11)

with the purpose and methods of discipline of his time, for by all accounts they were cruel. He was opposed to corporal punishment because it is not useful in inculcating love for school and it is very likely to bring about the opposite result. (Great Didactic, p. 401) The only time he approved of corporal punishment was for 'moral delinquencies', never for the child's inability to learn.

Moral development or training is not addressed at all by NAEYC in spite of the fact that considerable literature exists about it.

Comenius addressed the issue of moral training in a separate chapter in the School of Infancy (pp. 56-69) for he wanted to reeducate the heart of man as well as his mind. In it, he summarizes that moral development depends on:

(1) perpetual examples of virtuous conduct,
(2) Properly timed and prudent instruction, and
(3) duly regulated discipline. (School of Infancy, p. 56)

EPILOGUE

An attempt has been made in this paper to look into the past for the roots of contemporary practices in early childhood education.

Comenius' goal for a panharmonious world through universal education is still unattained, but because of his life long efforts and dedication, today's educational goals are clearer.

His own words best summarize his philosophy:

> Let the main object of this, our Didactic, be as follows:
> To seek and to find a method of instruction, by which teachers may teach less, but learners may learn more; by which schools may be the scene of less noise, aversion, and useless labor, but of more leisure, enjoyment, and solid progress; and through which the Christian community may have less darkness, perplexity, and dissension, but on the other hand more light, orderliness, peace, and rest. (Great Didactic, p. 156)

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